

Redefining India

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The Quit India Movement in Assam

-Dr. Fakrul Islam Laskar

The national movement in Assam constituted an integral part in the landmark of India's struggle for freedom. The province which went through the baptism of fire in 1921 and yet again in 1930-32 did not fall behind other Indian provinces and responded fully to the Quit India Movement, 1942. In terms of dimensions and intensity, the Quit India Movement surpassed all the previous movements including the Great Revolt of 1857. The inhabitants of Assam jumped into the vortex of struggle with the determination of 'do or die' in a way that would make every freedom loving people proud.

The All India Congress Committee met in Bombay under the presidency of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad on August 7, 1942. The resolution of 'Quit India' was adopted on August 8, 1942. It was moved by Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel seconded it. The resolution was carried by a big majority while a few Communist members opposed it. To dismiss British and American doubts, Maulana Azad clarified that the demand for 'Quit India' only stood for the transfer of power.

Mohammad Ali Jinnah in a press statement expressed his view and said, "I deeply regret that the Congress has finally declared war and has launched a most dangerous mass movement in spite of numerous warnings and advice from various individuals, parties and organizations in this country". He appealed to the Muslim community to keep themselves away from the Quit India Movement.¹

The British Government was in no way ready to tolerate the Congress's rebellion that was to hamper its efforts for defense against the Japanese aggressions. The bureaucratic machinery of the Government became active and made proper preparations to nip any active rebellion in the bud. Maulana Azad along with Mahatma Gandhi and members of the Congress Working Committee were arrested and they were taken to unknown places. The All India Congress Committee and all the Provincial Congress Committees except that of North West Frontier Province were banned and most of the Congress workers throughout the country were arrested.²

The news of the arrest of the beloved leaders of the country spread like wild fire from village to village, and people in resentment came out to streets to demonstrate to the world their determination to secure the release of these leaders and wrest power from the British hands at any cost.³ The leaders did not get time to chalk out a clear-cut plan of resistance and thus it was left to the public to go forward with their own plan keeping faith to the path of non-violence as directed by Mahatma Gandhi.⁴

The Assam leaders including Mohammad Tayyebulla, the then President of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (A.P.C.C.), F. A. Ahmed, Ex-Finance Minister in the Gopinath Bardoloi Cabinet, B.R. Medhi, Ex-President of A.P.C.C., Dr. H. K. Das and Liladhar Barooah, both were in the charge of the Baihata Khadi Ashram, D. Sharma, Chief Whip of the Congress and two others were arrested on 9th August 1942. Gopinath Bardoloi, the Congress leader in the Assam Legislative Assembly and Siddhinath Sarma, the General Secretary of A.P.C.C. while returning to Assam after attending

the All India Congress Committee meeting were arrested as soon as they set their foot on the soil of Assam at Dhubri. Besides them, a number of other leaders were also arrested from different corners of Assam.⁵

The masses bereft of their leaders left to themselves and followed the usual techniques of struggle, viz. holding meetings, taking out processions, boycotting schools and colleges and picketing at the markets and liquor shops. Village Panchayats were set up almost everywhere and some areas like Bahjani, Hatisung, Roha, Jamuguri, Dhakuwakhana, Chatia etc. behaved as independent units and that was too for a sufficiently long period. In these areas, cases were heard and settled before the Panchayats and jails were formed for punishing the convicts. Village gates were built in some of the villages of Nowgong and Tezpur. No one was allowed to enter into the villages without permission. A system of espionage was also developed that helped the movement in many ways.⁶

Regarding the detainment of the political leaders, Sir Syed Mohammad Saadulla, the Premier of Assam, while making his statement on the political situation and economic condition of the province in the Assam Legislative Assembly, mentioned that the Central Government had no other option but to detain the Congress leaders as security prisoners. He opined that the inhabitants of Assam should strengthen the hands of the military by extreme war efforts in keeping the enemy out of Assam, especially at a time when Japan reached the border of Assam.⁷

The depiction of the movement of 1942 would be incomplete if the incidents of the preceding months of August 1942 are not discussed. It was because of the involvement of Japan in the World War II, India found herself in a very important strategic position in the World War map. Realizing the importance of India's co-operation in war against Japan, the British War Cabinet decided to depute Cripps Mission to India to settle the Indian problems negotiating with the Indian leaders. But the Indians lost all faith on the British

Government due to the failure of the Cripps Mission. The dissatisfaction of the Indians further increased when they came to know about the vicious discrimination based on color faced by the Indian evacuees from Burma after the quick fall of Singapore and Burma.⁸

The people of Assam were full of anger and resentment because of the incidents occurred in the neighboring countries, especially in Burma. It was due to its geographical location, the inhabitants of Assam had all the first hand information about the happenings in Burma. Meanwhile, the Congress constituted emergency committees, anticipating trouble ahead, in every province to accomplish its agenda of 'self sufficiency' and 'self protection'. One such committee was also formed in Assam and under that committee an efficient *Santi-Sena* organization was built up. About 20,000 volunteers joined the *Santi-Sena* organization whose leaders were trained in such a way to meet any emergency arising out of the World War II. Jawaharlal Nehru was so impressed with that organization that once seeing its rally at Boko, Assam, he said, "I would not forget easily the sight I have seen here". The *Santi-Senas* used to guard the villages at night. They offered yeoman service in rendering aid to the evacuees at the stations on the Assam Bengal Railway.⁹

The Assam Congress provided special importance to the organizational and training aspects of the *Santi-Sena* organization. It was not allowed to cooperate with the Government nor with the police. The *Santi-Sena* organization was formed to maintain peace and order in the countryside and also as a possible replacement of the police force. Realizing the threat posed by the *Santi-Sena* organization, the district officers became worried about the organization and one of the district officers expressed his view that "the establishment of such associations at a critical time like the present is a thoroughly unhealthy and unwelcome sign, the implication of which should not be overlooked". The Assam Congress also tried to develop the village *panchayat system* in the line of local self-government by making it an elective and an autonomous body.¹⁰

One important aspect of the Quit India Movement was the large scale participation of masses in all important activities of it. The processions and the meetings got unbelievable response. The women also came forward in thousands and took an active role in the movement. Seeing the response of the common people, the British administration became nervous and panicky. To overawe and cow down the movement, the administration followed the policy of ruthless repression. But more repression resulted greater resentment among the masses and quite often the expression of anger was unknown to them before. People responded the atrocities by cutting telegraphic wires, uprooting railway lines, burning government buildings and houses.¹¹

The Congress volunteers in batches, about 10 to 12 volunteers in each batch, picketed at the Bindukuri Hat located under Tezpur police station on September 13, 1942. They asked the villagers and the shop-keepers not to sell anything to the military contractors and laborers.¹² A procession of students with the National Flag was carried out at Dibrugarh on 23rd September 1942. The procession passed in front of some Indian soldiers who saluted the National Flag. Then the students combined with the soldiers shouted *Mahatmaji ki joy*, resounded the sky.¹³

The response of the people of Nowgong district was overwhelming. The district could rightly be called the Midnapur or Satara of Assam. It was in Nowgong alone that all methods from non-violent non-co-operation to uprooting of railway lines, destroying of bridges etc. were applied. It can thus be said that the district was a political laboratory to the people of Assam in the year 1942. The *Santi-Sena* organization, comprising about 16,000, was very much strong in Nowgong. The strength, integrity and political consciousness of *santi-senas* were the very basis of the movement.¹⁴

On October 12, 1942, a procession of women passed through Patacharkuchi in Kamrup district. There was an attempt by the processionists to enter into the Patacharkuchi Police Station but the police pushed them back. Again on the

13th of October 1942, a meeting was held at a place under Rangiya Police Station where the speakers delivered anti-government speeches.¹⁵ The Congress workers of Bojali under Patacharkuchi Police Station organized a Council of Action. Without the permission from the members of that Council of Action, nobody was allowed to sell or purchase paddy within that area. The administration, however, ordered the Officer in-charge to crush that Council of Action immediately.¹⁶

Instances of communal tension between the Hindus and the Muslims had also been reported from Rangiya and its adjoining villages. It originated from picketing and obstructing the Muslim poultry dealers at Rangiya market.¹⁷

Manuscript posters in English entitled "Britishers Quit India", "Kick out Britishers" etc. had been pasted on the trees and other places in Gauhati by the students. The students had also gone into the interior of Kamrup district and agitated the students of the local High Schools. The students of almost all the High Schools, as a result, went on to strike and along with the Congress workers they engaged in anti-British and anti-war propaganda. Leaflets pasted in various corners of Lakhimpur town were also found on the night of the 11th August 1942. In these leaflets, "stand against the oppression policy, observe complete *hartal*, join protest meeting", "we want National Government, freedom is our birth right", "we want release of political prisoners" etc. were written in Hindi, Assamese and English. It was suspected to be the activities of the local Congress workers.¹⁸

Madan Barpujari, General Secretary of the *Assam Students Federation* and Mukti Barua, General Secretary of the *Dibrugarh Students Federation*, were found to have collected about 60 students of the local schools at the gate of the George Institute on August 12, 1942. Their object was to stage a procession in the town as a mark of protest against the arrest of the Congress leaders in India and the alleged opening of fire in certain places in India as well as to make anti-Fascist propaganda. But on receipt of that information, the Deputy Commissioner and

the Superintendent of Police reached on the spot without any delay and dispersed the students' gathering. Madan Barpujari and Mukti Barua were arrested for organizing a procession without the requisite permission. They were, however, subsequently released with a warning by the Deputy Commissioner. But Madan Barpujari and Mukti Barua immediately after their release from jail met the Congress workers, other student leaders and also the leaders of the peasants and the laborers and requested them to help in making the general strike a success.¹⁹

The students played a crucial role in the Quit India Movement. After the arrest of the Congress leaders and workers, the students became active, took the initiative and led the movement for more than four months. A large number of students were arrested and convicted for their participation in the movement. At Lakhimpur, Tilak Datta, Khareswar Sarma, Lakshi Sarma were cruelly assaulted for picketing at schools and courts. Students' processions in Nowgong town, Dergaon, Barpeta, Sibsagar were *lathi* charged and many students got injury as a result. In Sibsagar, girl students like Kalpana Barua, Lili Bora, Bijoy Hazarika and many others were injured because of *lathi* charge. At Jorhat, a notorious incident took place. Arrested students were left near a forest or desolate place. But in spite of all these repressive measures, the administration failed to suppress the rising temper of the students.²⁰

In Sylhet district in the Surma Valley, when the district leaders were arrested and imprisoned due to their connection with the Quit India Movement, a few Congress workers absconded in order to conduct the movement. Among them, the prominent were Maulavi Ibrahim, Amalendu Bhusan Chowdhury etc.²¹ The Cachar District Congress Committee, Sylhet District Congress Committee and their various sub-Committees and branches had been declared unlawful associations because of their activities.²²

The participation of Muslims in the Quit India Movement in Sylhet was significant and it was because of Maulana Syed

Hussain Ahmad Madani who used to spend the month of *Ramzan* in Sylhet in each year. Through his religious discussions during his stay in Sylhet, he inspired the Muslims to participate in India's freedom struggle. He endeavored to keep the Muslims away from the influence of the Muslim League. The *Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind* had also a firm position in Sylhet. At the beginning of the movement, Muslim students, most of who were Madrassa students, held processions shouting slogan, 'British Quit India'. The students of schools and colleges of Sylhet also organized meetings, processions etc. The Government imposed section 144 but meetings, processions were being held defying it. The schools and colleges of the district remained closed. The lawyers also boycotted the courts and the bar library of Sylhet were locked for about one month.²³

In order to restrain the movement, the administration resorted to firing in Nowgong, Tezpur, Goalpara, and Barpeta and in various other areas. Even the pregnant women, young girls and boys were not spared. Dhekiajuli witnessed such a grievous occurrence where dead bodies were littered on the roads and were found even four or five days after the incident of firing. In Barpeta, Tularam Keot, a Police Officer, found a devilish pleasure at firing the crowds on the road side randomly and even tried to justify his diabolical act. There were also the cases of merciless assaults by the police and military. Even the pregnant women and the women in their monthly course could not escape the ruthless attack of police.²⁴

In most of the *lathi* charges, the police got the assistance of the Assam Rifles. *Lathi* charges were made extensively in North Lakhimpur, Dhalpur, Bihpuria, Tezpur, Bihali, Barpeta, Sibsagar, Teok, Golaghat, Goalpara, Nowgong, Chatial and in various other areas. In each of these cases, the *lathi* was charged on the processionists. However, no evidence is available to show that they were asked to disperse before the *lathi* charge. Besides this, there were also the cases of depredation and looting by the police. It was a readymade technique in the hands of the government to cow down the

people and thereby to suppress the popular outburst by levying punitive tax. The police raids carried out at different volunteers' camps and villages for realizing collective fines were, in actuality, looting raids. There was as such no basis for assessing the taxes, the whims of the Sub-divisional Officers and the Police Officers were the deciding factor. Even in most of the cases no receipt was given to the payers. People became so scared of police that at the sight of their entering at villages, people run away from their houses and in the interval police searched the houses, filled their pockets and caused damaged to the houses. Police looting was widely took place at Dhalpur, Bihpuria, Rangali, Biswanath, Chaygaon, Sorbhog, Dergaon, Roha, Kaliabar, Dehejia, Golaghat, Goalpara, Teok etc.²⁵

During the Quit India Movement, a large number of freedom loving people from Assam sacrificed their life for the cause of India's liberation from the colonial clutches. Among them, the names of Kushal Kunwar and Kamala Miri were at the top. Kushal Kunwar was hanged for his alleged involvement in derailment case at Sarupathar. His case was tried by the District Magistrate, Sibsagar and the Governor of Assam heard his appeal. Kushal Kunwar was given the highest punishment although no convincing proof of his participation with the derailment case had been established. Kamala Miri was a member of the Plains Tribal Community. He went to hunger strike in jail in sympathy with Mahatma Gandhi's historic fasting in February 1943. He was to be released on 23rd April but on 22nd he died a noble death. He was old and became too weak. All attempts to persuade Kamala Miri to obtain release by signing a bond of good conduct failed. A little while ahead of his demise, he said the jail authority, "I am suffering for all of you. Don't please tempt me to sign a bond".²⁶

Mohammad Tayyebulla, the then president of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee, while appreciating the strictest non violence, discipline and bravery of the people of Assam, mentions in his memoir the atrocities and brutality of the British authority. A military force on 20th August 1942 while

patrolling near the Bebejia Bridge that was five miles away from the Nowgong town shot down two young men on the mere suspicion that they were coming to blow up the bridge. Again on 21st August, two people were killed likewise at the Roha Bridge, nearly fourteen miles from the town of Nowgong. He also states in his memoir the tragic and painful incident occurred in the Dhekiajuli police station of Darrang district on September 20, 1942. On that day, more than 10,000 people marched towards the Dhekiajuli police station with a view to hoist the national flag in the police station compound as a mark of possession taking. They were completely peaceful *satyagrahis* but the police without any dispersal order opened fire on them. As a result, more than 20 people including a girl of 12 were killed. However, a volunteer in the midst of firing succeeded in hoisting the flag on the police station.²⁷

The police also committed atrocities at Gahpur on the same day, i.e. on September 20, 1942. On that day about 4,000 people went to Gahpur from Kalabari side while about 3,000 to 4,000 people reached there from Barangabari side and both met near the Gahpur police station. The unarmed men and women went to the Gahpur police station to hoist the national flag in the police station compound. They tried to enter into the police station by two gates, western gate and the eastern gate. At the western gate, Kanaklata Barua and some other 10 girls were at the head of the procession. Kanaklata Barua had in her hand the national flag. When the Officer in Charge of Gahpur Police Station refused to allow the people to enter into the police station, Kanaklata Barua appealed, "At least you allow us the womenfolk to go in. We will not create any trouble. We will simply hoist the flag and come out." But the Police Officer warned, "If you advance one step more, we will fire." The threat of the Police Officer failed to deviate the masses from their object and they went forward. The police, subsequently, fired on the masses. One bullet hit the chest of Kanaklata Barua while other one smashed the head of Mukundaram Kakati. Those who received serious injuries because of firing were Hem Barua, Bagai Kachari, Khargeswar

Barua, Thuleswar Rajkhowa, Bholanath Bharali Barua. Despite all those firing, deaths and lethal wounds, the national flag was hoisted over the Gahpur Police Station and it was Rampati Rajkhowa who somehow attained that object.²⁸

Although the Quit India Movement in Assam absolutely remained leaderless, the response of the people was magnificent. It was a spontaneous revolution, an instinctive burst of protest and hunger for freedom of the masses. The Government tried to nip the Quit India Movement in the bud by mass arresting, first of the leaders, then of the active workers and lastly of the people without any discrimination. People were arrested on mere suspicion and were detained in jail without any trial for months. But these deaths, injuries, humiliations and atrocities were the price of liberty paid by the Indians for India's cherished goal of independence. The people of Assam along with the rest of the country were determined as never before to 'do or die'. The Quit India Movement was an open war for India's liberation from the clutches of colonial regime that electrified the whole country and effectively paralyzed the Government machinery.

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